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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2405 (2018), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of the previous report, on 10 September 2018 (A/73/374–S/2018/824).

II. Relevant developments

3. Parliamentary elections were held as scheduled on 20 October. In response to long delays and widespread operational difficulties, the Independent Election Commission extended voting in some polling centres for an additional day. Violence peaked on election day, causing the highest number of civilian casualties in any single day in 2018. In Kandahar Province, elections were delayed for one week following the death of two high-ranking security officials in a Taliban attack. Controversy over the use of biometric voter verification dominated both the pre-election and post-election phases, as the electoral management bodies and political parties debated whether to count ballots cast without the use of the technology. Political leaders began negotiations to form tickets for the presidential elections, scheduled for 20 April 2019. The appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the United States Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation reinvigorated peace efforts. The Russian Federation hosted an international meeting on Afghanistan, attended by representatives of the High Peace Council of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan remained largely cordial. Preparations accelerated ahead of the Geneva Ministerial Conference, held on 28 November. The humanitarian situation remained

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grave, characterized by high levels of displacement, an increase in conflict-related trauma cases, and drought conditions causing food insecurity for millions of Afghans. The return of refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran continued at high levels, placing further pressure on resources in western Afghanistan.

A. Political developments

4. The political sphere was dominated by electoral preparations for the parliamentary elections on 20 October. In the months before the election, the Independent Election Commission advanced technical preparations, including the recruitment of polling centre staff, the compilation of polling centre-based voter lists and the accreditation of electoral observers. In cooperation with the Electoral Complaints Commission, the Independent Election Commission also held provincial electoral forums in 33 provinces to raise awareness among voters and improve buy-in among electoral stakeholders. The official campaign period started on 28 September, galvanizing political parties and candidates, who began mobilizing support at the provincial and district levels.

5. As preparations continued, political parties maintained their demand for the introduction of biometric voter verification technology as a measure to curb electoral fraud. On 15 September, supporters of the Grand National Coalition of Afghanistan, a diverse grouping of political parties, began blockades of Independent Election Commission offices in Balkh, Herat and Kandahar Provinces, expanding to Nangarhar Province on 18 September, in an effort to pressure the Commission. On 22 September, the Independent Election Commission announced that it would be responsible for the implementation of the biometric voter verification process, which entailed scanning two index fingerprints, a digital photograph of the voter and a scan of the voter's *tazkera* (identity document) and voter registration sticker. The announcement relieved the immediate pressure on the Independent Election Commission from political parties, which ceased their blockades of the four provincial Independent Election Commission offices. On 16 October, the Government's National Procurement Authority announced that, in collaboration with the Central Statistics Organization, it had signed a contract with Dermalog, a Germany-based company, to provide biometric voter verification technology on polling day. However, civil society organizations expressed concern that this late procurement left little time for crucial tasks, including additional recruitment and training of polling centre staff, public outreach, logistical arrangements for the transportation and retrieval of the biometric voter verification devices, and the revision of polling day procedures to incorporate the new technology. Electoral watchdogs raised concerns that the introduction of the technology would stretch the capacity of the Independent Election Commission to complete other electoral preparations, and the international community voiced concerns that under certain configurations, the technology could threaten the secrecy of the ballot.

6. Electoral preparations were further complicated by significant security threats against the electoral process by the Taliban, which issued statements warning voters and electoral staff not to participate in the elections and threatening security personnel charged with protecting election personnel and sites. A total of nine candidates were assassinated in the pre-election period, with the Taliban claiming responsibility for two of the attacks. Public confidence was shaken by the assassination of the Chief of Police of Kandahar Province, Abdul Razziq, in an attack claimed by the Taliban. In the aftermath, it was decided to postpone parliamentary elections in Kandahar Province until 27 October.

7. On 20 October, parliamentary elections were held in 32 provinces, all except Kandahar and Ghazni, where voter registration and candidate nominations had earlier

been stymied by protests blocking the Independent Election Commission. The elections were characterized by high voter enthusiasm, despite security threats. However, late polling centre openings often due to security threats against polling staff, confusion over the use of biometric voter verification devices, and errors in the newly introduced voter lists caused lengthy delays in many areas, leading some voters to leave polling centres without casting their ballots. Amid increasing voter frustration, the Independent Election Commission announced on the afternoon of 20 October that polling would be extended for several hours and that polling centres that had failed to open by 1 p.m. would be reopened on 21 October. In response to widespread reports of unavailable or malfunctioning biometric voter verification devices, the Commission also announced that voting could take place using voter lists in cases where biometric voter verification was unavailable. The announcements placated voters in some areas but prompted concerns among some candidates that the additional time and ensuing confusion could create opportunities for fraud. On 21 October, polling centres opened in many provinces and in Kabul City. The following week, on 27 October, parliamentary elections were conducted in Kandahar Province, with technical problems similar to those that had occurred on 20 October. According to the Independent Election Commission, a total of 4,812 polling centres were open across the three days of voting, with the estimated turnout reported at 4.2 million voters. The turnout was higher in provincial capitals, with particularly high numbers recorded in Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar, Paktia and Daikundi.

8. Out of 8.5 million registered voters, an estimated 35 per cent were women, an increase of eight percentage points compared with the 2014 presidential election. On election day, female voter turnout was estimated at around 30 per cent of the electorate. Polling stations for women numbered 7,429 compared with 11,667 for men. Some 13,000 Afghan women reportedly participated as election observers across Afghanistan.

9. The retrieval of materials and tally of results commenced immediately. Ballot retrieval was delayed in several provinces, owing mainly to security threats that required the use of helicopter rather than road movements. Recounts were subsequently announced by the Independent Election Commission in 24 provinces, owing to incomplete forms and procedural irregularities. The Electoral Complaints Commission registered 11,845 complaints. As at 18 November, it had completed adjudicating 10,447 complaints in 21 provinces.

10. The aftermath of the election was marred by a public dispute between the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission over the validity of non-biometric voter verification ballots. On 27 October, the Electoral Complaints Commission issued a statement declaring that all votes cast without the use of biometric voter verification should be nullified. Although not within the remit of the Electoral Complaints Commission, the statement quickly attracted the support of political parties and many candidates, who claimed that discarding non-biometric voter verification ballots was the only way to ensure that fraudulent votes were not counted towards the election results. Others expressed concern that the nullification of non-biometric voter verification ballots could result in the ballots of millions of genuine voters being discarded. On 30 October, the two Commissions released a joint statement announcing that non-biometric voter verification ballots would be counted, provided that printed voter lists had been used and verified in the polling centres. On 3 November, the Independent Election Commission announced that the publication of the preliminary election results would be delayed from the scheduled date of 10 November to a new date of 23 November for 32 provinces and 1 December for Kabul Province. On 23 November, however, the Commission had announced results for only five provinces.

11. As delays in the ballot retrieval and counting accumulated, political parties and opposition figures expressed increasing concern about the conduct of the elections, with some voicing scepticism that the Independent Election Commission would be unable to conduct the presidential elections on the scheduled date of 20 April 2019. The uncertainty over the presidential election led to the resurrection of calls for an interim administration, advocated most vocally by former President Karzai. On 6 November, the leader of the Hizb-i Islami political movement, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, joined those calls, stating that the electoral system should be changed to a proportional representation system and warning that Hizb-i Islami would call for an interim administration if demands were not met.

12. Nonetheless, most political leaders began channelling their energies towards the contestation of the 2019 presidential elections, with coalition-building activities accelerating as the deadline for finalizing nominations approached. On 31 October, Hizb-i Islami announced that the movement was considering fielding its own candidate for President in consultation with other political groups. Separately, on 8 November, the Grand National Coalition of Afghanistan announced that it would present a ticket with a presidential candidate, three Vice-Presidents, a Prime Minister and three deputy Prime Ministers. On 13 November, Chief Executive Abdullah stated that he would decide on his potential candidacy in consultation with former jihadi groups, but ruled out lending his support to another presidential candidate.

13. Meanwhile, President Ghani conducted a series of provincial visits, travelling to Ghazni, Faryab, Parwan, Kandahar, Helmand, Paktika and Daikundi Provinces, where he highlighted the Government's commitments on local infrastructure projects and security. On 2 November, the spokesperson for President Ghani confirmed that the President would run for re-election. On 9 November, while visiting the Hazara-majority province of Daikundi, President Ghani announced that the current Second Vice-President, Sarwar Danesh, an ethnic Hazara, would form part of his ticket.

14. On 25 August, the then National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, announced that he had resigned from his position owing to policy differences with President Ghani. The following day, President Ghani announced the appointment to the position of Hamdullah Mohib, the then Ambassador to the United States of America. This was followed by a series of personnel changes in the security leadership. On 2 October, President Ghani dismissed his Senior Adviser and Deputy Director of the National Security Council, Din Mohammad Jurat. A statement issued by the Office of the President confirmed that General Jurat had been removed by presidential decree. No details were given on the circumstances leading to his removal. On 18 October, seven members of the Office of the National Security Adviser resigned, including two senior members, the Directors of Strategic Threat Assessment and Strategic Communications.

15. The pursuit by Afghanistan of a negotiated peace settlement received additional impetus on 21 September, when the United States appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as its Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. From 4 to 14 October, Mr. Khalilzad visited Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in an effort to generate regional support for the Afghan peace process. During his visit to Afghanistan, Mr. Khalilzad met with President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah, representatives of the High Peace Council and members of the political opposition. In the meetings, Mr. Khalilzad emphasized the necessity of Afghan ownership of the peace process and, in a subsequent press conference, called on the Government and the Taliban to form negotiating teams to engage in direct talks. On 5 November, President Ghani announced that a national consultation board on the peace process would be formed with representatives nominated by civilian and military authorities in all 34 provinces. On 13 October, the Taliban announced that Mr. Khalilzad had met with the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar the previous day. According to the statement by the Taliban, the meeting was constructive, with

discussions revolving around the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan and finding a solution to the Afghan conflict. On 30 October, the Taliban announced the appointment of five senior officials, formerly imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, to its Political Commission. On 10 November, Mr. Khalilzad visited Afghanistan again, meeting with Government officials and members of the political opposition to discuss his plans for future regional engagement. This was followed by visits to other countries in the region, including Qatar, where Mr. Khalilzad again met with the Taliban Political Commission.

16. On 9 November, the Russian Federation hosted a conference on Afghanistan in Moscow, with representatives from China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and from the High Peace Council of Afghanistan and the Taliban Political Commission. An embassy official from the United States joined as well. Speaking at the conference, the Taliban representative reiterated the Taliban's position that the presence of international military forces was the main obstacle to peace in Afghanistan, adding that other issues, including mutual recognition between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, constitutional amendments and women's rights, could be negotiated once the issue of foreign troops had been resolved. Following the conference, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement in which it welcomed all efforts towards a peace process in Afghanistan but warned against allowing the Taliban to instrumentalize regional processes.

17. Since August, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) field offices have supported eight local peace initiatives, covering a total of 11 provinces. These included a series of consultations in support of the role of young people in the peace process in Paktya Province, an intercommunity conflict resolution initiative in Samangan Province and a project bringing together elders, religious scholars, women and young people to discuss confidence-building measures in volatile areas of Helmand Province.

B. Security

18. The security situation remained volatile, with incidents continuing at consistently high levels. While the number of security incidents in some categories decreased slightly, the overall number of casualties rose owing to an increase in the severity of certain attacks. The two contrasting exceptions to this trend were the Eid al-Adha holiday period and the first day of parliamentary elections on 20 October, which recorded exceptionally low and high incident levels, respectively. Between 16 August and 15 November, UNAMA recorded a total of 5,854 security incidents, a 2 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2017. The southern region saw the highest number of incidents followed by the eastern and south-eastern regions. Armed clashes continued to comprise the largest number of security incidents, recording 63 per cent of the total, although the number was 5 per cent lower compared with the same period in 2017. Suicide attacks decreased by 37 per cent, possibly reflecting successful interdiction efforts in Kabul and Jalalabad cities, while air strikes by the Afghan Air Force and international military forces increased by 25 per cent compared with the same period in 2017.

19. The overall level of violence decreased significantly during the Eid al-Adha holiday from 20 to 24 August. Over the holiday week, UNAMA recorded a total of 227 incidents, the lowest level of violence in a one-week period since early 2013. This reduction in violence occurred despite the Taliban's lack of acknowledgement of President Ghani's offer, on 19 August, of a three-month conditional ceasefire. Mirroring the security dynamics witnessed around the Eid al-Fitr holiday in June, the

number of Taliban-initiated attacks after Eid al-Adha quickly returned to the 2018 weekly average of 433 incidents.

20. The first election day, 20 October, witnessed high levels of security incidents around the country, with the Taliban conducting attacks and placing improvised explosive devices to disrupt the election process. Kunduz City recorded the highest number of incidents (25) followed by Kabul City, where there were 14 improvised explosive device attacks as well as a high-profile suicide attack claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Taking into account that voting did not take place in Kandahar and Ghazni Provinces, the overall number of security incidents on 20 October was comparable to figures recorded during the 2014 presidential run-off election. While intimidation by the Taliban was reported to have deterred many voters from turning out in areas under their control and influence, the high number of incidents did not result in any significant disruption of the electoral process in urban areas. On 29 October, a suicide attacker detonated at the entrance to the Independent Election Commission compound in Kabul. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for the attack. This was the second suicide attack recorded at the headquarters of the Commission in 2018.

21. Following the large-scale Taliban attack in Ghazni City in August, concerns remained about the possibility of another major attack in the south-east, including against Ghazni City. While that did not occur, the Taliban continued to pressure Government forces in the city outskirts, surrounding districts and along the main Highway 1, eventually capturing Andar district on 14 October. Security deteriorated in the Hazara-dominated western areas of Ghazni Province, with large-scale Taliban attacks leading to heavy clashes and large-scale displacement during the first half of November. A separate clash between Taliban and pro-Government militias in Khas Uruzgan district of Uruzgan Province also caused the displacement of Hazara families in November.

22. The Taliban temporarily captured strategic posts along main roads in several regions, allowing the group to effectively restrict movement between provinces. Along the Highway 1 route to Kabul, the Taliban captured Daymirdad and Sayyidabad districts of Wardak Province. The Taliban also carried out frequent attacks on the Mazar-Shirbingham and Maimana-Andkhoy main roads in the northern region, and along the Herat-Qala-e Naw road in the west, complicating Government access and limiting the movements of residents. On 30 September, the Taliban carried out a coordinated attack against several Government check posts in Qaysar district of Faryab Province, resulting in a protracted clash before the Taliban forces retreated on 1 October.

23. Concerns about security increased in Kandahar Province following the assassination of police chief Abdul Razziq, along with the provincial head of the National Directorate of Security, General Abdul Momin Husain Khel, in an armed attack in Kandahar City on 18 October. The Governor of Kandahar Province, Zalmai Wesa, was wounded in the attack, which occurred during the visit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Resolute Support Mission Commander. The Taliban claimed responsibility and posted the name of the alleged assailant on social media. On 22 October, following lobbying by local elders, President Ghani appointed Razziq's younger brother Tadin as the provincial Chief of Police.

24. The ISIL-KP presence remained significant in the eastern region, where the group claimed responsibility for three suicide and complex attacks in Nangarhar Province during the reporting period and six attacks in Kabul City. However, the robust presence of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in Jalalabad City since August appeared to have a positive impact on the overall security situation in the city. ISIL-KP continued to fight against the Taliban, with armed clashes between

the two groups reported in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. International military forces continued to target ISIL-KP, conducting a series of air strikes against targets in Deh Bala, Achin, Khogyani, Nazyan and Chaparhar districts of Nangarhar Province.

25. Thirteen incidents involving United Nations personnel were reported, including three cases of intimidation, seven criminal-related incidents and two improvised explosive device-related incidents. The dependant of a United Nations staff member living in Kunduz Province abducted in a criminal incident was released on 29 October.

C. Regional cooperation

26. Afghanistan and Pakistan continued efforts to improve their bilateral relations following the inauguration in August of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan. On 15 September, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, visited Kabul, meeting with President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Salahuddin Rabbani. Discussions addressed security, regional peace and stability, counter-terrorism and the implementation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. The visit was Minister Qureshi's first official trip after his appointment and was viewed as a signal of Pakistan's prioritization of the bilateral relationship. On 22 October, President Ghani publicly stated that the assassination of the Kandahar Chief of Police had been planned in Pakistan. The allegation prompted a strong response from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, which issued a statement on 24 October rejecting the claims as unfounded and calling on Afghan officials to channel discussions of security concerns through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity mechanism.

27. Efforts to improve international cooperation on the Afghan peace process expanded. On 11 September, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) convened a meeting of permanent representatives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, attended by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. The Secretary General of OIC called on participants to encourage all parties concerned to engage in peace talks. On 4 and 5 October, Chief Executive Abdullah visited Jakarta, meeting with the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, who called on the Taliban to come to the negotiating table. On 3 and 4 November, a delegation from Indonesia's Ulema Council visiting Kabul reiterated support for the peace process and proposed following up on the trilateral meeting of Afghan, Pakistani and Indonesian ulema held in Jakarta in May 2018.

28. Multilateral cooperation continued under the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, with a meeting of senior officials in New York on 28 September and regional technical group meetings on culture and education in the Islamic Republic of Iran on 20 August; counter-terrorism in Kabul on 15 September; trade, commerce and industry in New Delhi on 20 October; and counter-narcotics in Moscow on 31 October.

III. Human rights

29. On 10 October, UNAMA released its 2018 third-quarter update on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.[1] The Mission documented 8,050 civilian casualties (2,798 people killed and 5,252 injured) between 1 January and 30 September 2018, the highest number of civilian deaths recorded in the first nine months of the year since 2014. UNAMA attributed 65 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements (35 per cent to the Taliban, 25 per cent to ISIL-KP and 5 per cent to

[1] UNAMA, "Quarterly report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2018" (Kabul, 10 October 2018).

unidentified anti-government elements, including self-proclaimed ISIL-KP), 22 per cent to pro-government forces (16 per cent to Afghan national security forces, 5 per cent to international military forces and 1 per cent to pro-government armed groups), 10 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces and 3 per cent to other incidents, including explosive remnants of war and cross-border shelling.

30. The use of improvised explosive device tactics (including suicide and non-suicide attacks) caused 3,634 civilian casualties (1,065 people killed and 2,569 injured) and at 45 per cent of the total was the leading cause of civilian casualties during the first nine months of 2018. In a special report of 7 October,[2] UNAMA documented that the use of improvised explosive devices by anti-government elements reached record high levels in the first three quarters of 2018, with anti-government elements increasingly directing such attacks against the civilian population, including minority Shi'a Muslims. Ground engagements, the second leading cause, accounted for 2,311 civilian casualties (605 people killed and 1,706 injured), amounting to 29 per cent of the total. UNAMA continued to document high levels of civilian casualties from aerial strikes by pro-government forces, recording 649 civilian casualties (313 people killed and 336 injured), with women and children comprising more than half of those casualties. UNAMA documented 2,136 child casualties (653 children killed and 1,483 injured) and 829 female casualties (250 women killed and 579 injured).

31. Violence during the parliamentary elections on 20 October caused the most civilian casualties recorded in a single day to date in 2018, as well as the most civilian casualties on any election day since UNAMA began documenting such incidents in 2009. In total, 435 civilian casualties (56 people killed and 379 injured) were recorded on election day. Nearly all the casualties resulted from deliberate or indiscriminate attacks by anti-government elements, primarily the Taliban. UNAMA documented 53 civilian casualties (13 people killed and 40 injured) from the suicide attack at a polling centre in Kabul claimed by ISIL-KP.

32. From 1 July to 30 September, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 412 grave violations affecting 820 children (241 girls, 570 boys and 9 unspecified). The most significant violations were the killing and maiming of 783 children (284 deaths, of which 179 were boys, 99 were girls and 6 were unspecified; 499 children injured, of whom 356 were boys, 140 were girls and 3 were unspecified). Those living in central, southern and northern regions were the most affected. During the third quarter, there were 33 incidents of attacks against schools and education-related personnel, compared with 79 incidents during the second quarter when schools were targeted because of their use as voter registration centres. The country task force on monitoring and reporting attributed 15 incidents to ISIL-KP, 14 to the Taliban, 2 to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and 1 each to pro-government militias and undetermined armed groups. The violations included nine incidents of the recruitment and use of children, involving 19 boys, five incidents of abduction, involving 15 boys, and rape and other forms of sexual violence committed against three children (two girls and one boy). In addition, it verified 19 attacks against health-care facilities and 8 incidents of denial of humanitarian access.

33. Of the 19 attacks against health facilities and health-care personnel verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting, 15 attacks were against facilities and 4 were against health-care workers, involving eight personnel, including three

[2] UNAMA, "Special report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict: Increasing harm to Afghan civilians from the deliberate and indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices" (Kabul, 7 October 2018).

women, compared with 12 incidents in the previous reporting period. The task force attributed 14 incidents to armed groups (11 to the Taliban and 3 to ISIL-KP), 2 each to the Afghan National Army and international military forces and 1 jointly to international military forces and the National Directorate of Security.

34. The country task force on monitoring and reporting verified nine incidents of the recruitment and use of children involving 19 boys (10 by the Taliban, 7 by pro-government militia and 2 by the Afghan Local Police), compared with verified recruitment and use of two boys and documentation of credible allegations of the recruitment and use of five boys in the previous reporting period. The task force verified three cases of sexual violence against children, including for the purposes of *bacha bazi*, two by the Afghan National Police and one by the Afghan Local Police. The task force verified five incidents of abduction of children, involving 15 boys (three by the Taliban and one each by the Afghan Local Police and Tehrik-eTaliban Pakistan).

35. On 10 November, a group of 55 juveniles, who surrendered on 31 July in Jowzjan Province along with 250 suspected affiliates of self-proclaimed ISIL-KP to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were transferred to the Kabul Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre. The juveniles had been detained without charge by the National Directorate of Security in violation of the Criminal Procedure Code.

36. Following the launch in May 2018 of the UNAMA report "Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women", the Ministry of Women's Affairs established a committee on 2 October to review the Elimination of Violence against Women Law of 2009. The Directorate on Alternatives to Imprisonment, established earlier in 2018 by the Attorney General's Office to develop policy on non-custodial sentencing options, became operational in September. The Mission continued its advocacy for a policy to include alternatives to imprisonment for less serious criminal offences of violence against women. Women's protection shelters were affected by decreased donor funding, with at least 2 of the 26 operations in 21 provinces reducing their services.

37. On 25 November, the United Nations in Afghanistan commemorated International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, marking the beginning of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence global campaign under the global theme "Orange the World: #HearMeToo". UNAMA convened 13 workshops, consultations, round tables, panel discussions and an art competition, highlighting concerns regarding crimes of violence against women in Afghanistan, such as harmful traditional practices, underreporting of crimes and the implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law of 2009.

38. Between 27 September and 15 November, UNAMA convened 10 Global Open Day events across Afghanistan on the theme "Women's participation in peace processes", engaging in dialogue with 224 Afghans (192 women and 32 men) representing 16 of the 34 provinces and at least 37 districts. Women emphasized the importance of their participation in peace processes. The dialogues culminated in a national event co-hosted by the United Nations on 4 December, where participants underscored the importance of equal and meaningful participation of Afghan women in peace talks.

39. On 16 October, the Government established the Journalists Support Fund for the purpose of helping journalists and bereaved families of media workers. Journalists and media workers continued to face intimidation, harassment and violence by anti-government elements and pro-government forces. UNAMA documented four incidents involving killing, beating and two threats against journalists.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

40. Preparations for the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan of 28 November accelerated with reference to key deliverables, including holding parliamentary elections, finalizing all national priority programmes, achieving International Monetary Fund benchmarks, promoting private sector growth, making progress on anti-corruption and advancing security sector reform. On 23 September, a preparatory meeting was held in New York, co-chaired by Minister Rabbani and my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA. On 8 November, a senior officials' meeting was held in Geneva, where discussions focused on the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework to be adopted at the Conference and Afghanistan's economic growth strategy.

41. During the reporting period, President Ghani's team revised its anti-corruption strategy, adding 52 new benchmarks while eliminating others. The Government expanded the anti-corruption legal framework, recording progress on key pieces of legislation. In September, the working group on criminal law reform finalized draft laws on anti-corruption and whistle-blowing. On 9 October, the Government submitted its draft anti-corruption law to the National Assembly for review. The new law incorporates recommendations from the UNAMA anti-corruption report of 2018, including the codification of the legal basis for the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre and the establishment of a stand-alone anti-corruption commission. However, civil society organizations expressed concern that the proposed selection process for the commission was insufficiently independent. On 11 October, the draft whistle-blower protection law was submitted to the National Assembly. On 5 November, the National Assembly approved the Law on Declaration and Registration of Assets of State Officials and Employees, which had been adopted by presidential decree in November 2017. According to the Assets Registration Administration, more than 16,000 asset declaration forms have been registered, including 73 from members of the Upper and Lower Houses of the National Assembly.

42. On 26 September, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre convicted six high-ranking officials from the Ministry of the Interior, including a former general and a former Deputy Minister, of corruption-related offences. Three other former officials of the Ministry were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment on 9 October. Since September 2018, the Centre has finalized three trials involving 16 defendants at the primary level and two cases involving seven defendants at the appeals court level, representing a gradual decline in the number of cases compared with previous periods. Judges and prosecutors from the Centre cite the lack of enforcement of summonses and arrest warrants as the main reason for the decline. In total, the Centre has finalized 42 trials involving 169 defendants and 41 cases involving 128 defendants on appeal.

43. Efforts to implement merit-based recruitment in the public sector continued. In August, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission reported that based on its provincial assessments, it had identified 2,533 senior provincial line directorate positions, of which 1,362 were occupied by acting directors, while other positions were vacant. As a result, 114 high-level provincial line directorate positions were opened up for competitive recruitment, and 158 applicants sat a new standardized written exam for 35 senior provincial directorate positions, administered by the newly established Exam Centre of the Commission.

44. The Government continued reforms to improve accountability in the security sector, with a focus on the Ministry of the Interior. On 30 August, the Government completed the personnel asset inventory for existing Afghan National Police personnel, with the process to continue for new recruits. Further, the Government completed the verification of personnel asset inventory records against the

Web-enabled payroll system. Out of 147,875 records, 106,189 personnel were identified as legitimate for the payment of salaries. The remaining 41,686 records were removed from the payroll for such reasons as retirement, desertion and attrition. The Government continued reforms to its security leadership under the Inherent Law. On 1 October, the Ministry of Defence announced a third tranche of retirements from the Afghan National Army under the Law, comprising an additional 22 generals. In total, some 1,800 Afghan National Army personnel, including 380 generals, have been retired since the Inherent Law was decreed in November 2017.

45. The Government continued its efforts to promote private sector growth. On 8 October, the Council of Ministers endorsed Afghanistan's first national trade policy, which is aimed at enhancing export competitiveness and implementing the commitments resulting from the accession of Afghanistan to the World Trade Organization in June 2016. On 31 October, the World Bank announced that Afghanistan had risen 16 places in its global ease of doing business rankings, bringing the country's ranking to 167 out of 190. The Bank highlighted reforms, including reductions in the cost of starting a business and the adoption of a new tax administration as factors behind the improved ranking.

V. Humanitarian assistance and refugees

46. Between 16 August and 31 October, 38,558 people were newly displaced by the conflict, bringing the total number of displaced persons to 289,866 in 2018 (60,720 women, 167,342 children and 61,804 men). Although conflict-related displacement is down by more than two thirds compared with the same period in 2017, many displaced families continue to have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin in safety and dignity. During the reporting period, humanitarian partners provided food and other life-saving assistance to 165,759 people displaced by conflict.

47. The number of trauma cases that received treatment in the period from 16 August to 31 October was 34,242, an increase of 21 per cent compared with 2017. The need for trauma care was especially high in Helmand, Kunduz, Takhar, Ghazni, Kunar, Zabul and Kabul Provinces, where clashes took heavy tolls. During the reporting period, the 15 partners of the health cluster provided consultations to 897,353 people, of whom 53.4 per cent were women and girls.

48. After the crisis in Ghazni in August, the United Nations deployed teams to remove 106 explosive remnants of war that posed a threat to community safety and security. The teams provided risk education to more than 8,000 people. From January to September 2018, the teams visited 188 communities, removing 1,611 explosive remnants of war, surveying hazardous areas and providing risk education, cumulatively reducing the risk of death and injury to approximately 810,239 individuals. Over the same period, the United Nations and partners cleared 4.9 square kilometres of high-impact explosive contamination, benefiting 67 communities. Responding to the protection concerns of returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, approximately 180,304 people have received risk education at centres across the country.

49. In recognition of the global role of Afghanistan in mine action, the Government presided over the 17th meeting of the States parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, held from 26 to 30 November in Geneva.

50. During the reporting period, eight new cases of polio were confirmed, bringing the total number of cases in 2018 to 19. The epicentre of the ongoing outbreak, Kandahar, accounts for 9 of the 19 cases. Owing to a ban on house-to-house

vaccination in the southern provinces (Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan), since May 2018, 846,000 children have not been vaccinated. With an additional 200,000 children in Ghazni not reached, the total number of children not vaccinated in the eastern and southern regions during the reporting period was approximately 1 million. The Ministry of Public Health and the United Nations developed contingency plans using other approaches to reach those children with vaccines.

51. As at 31 October, drought had affected 229 out of 401 districts across the country. In western Afghanistan, more than 250,000 people have now been forced from rural areas to urban centres since the beginning of the year. Most of the newly displaced people live in informal settlements with few, if any, basic social services. Many rural communities have depleted their assets, selling off livestock to buy food and consuming the coming planting season's seeds. According to the United Nations, 3.5 million people are severely food insecure as a result of the drought and in need of life-saving food and livelihood assistance. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification analysis conducted in October, 10.8 million people are at emergency or crisis levels of food insecurity.

52. The United Nations and partners are working to enable communities to cultivate crops for the 2019 harvest and supporting those who have already been forced to leave their homes. Families displaced to urban centres by drought received the same emergency food assistance as people displaced by conflict. Food was provided to families in rural areas to prevent further drought-related displacement. By October, the United Nations and its partners had distributed food assistance to 706,000 people in the worst-affected provinces of Badghis, Faryab, Ghor, Herat and Jowzjan.

53. In October, the United Nations and partners began to expand support for at least six months to all of the estimated 3.5 million people in need in 20 provinces owing to drought. The United Nations distributed assistance to more than 1 million people in October and is on course to reach 2.5 million before the end of the year, while partners are to reach the remaining 1 million people. In addition, work has been initiated to reach 1.4 million people before winter with concentrated animal feed, fodder seed and wheat seed in 21 provinces. The Government has mobilized 60,000 tons of wheat grain from its own reserves. The United Nations has transported 30,000 tons to date and is procuring complementary commodities from international markets.

54. A total of 110,954 Afghan citizens, including spontaneous returnees, deportees and refugees, returned to Afghanistan during the reporting period. From 16 August to 31 October, 4,400 undocumented returnees arrived from Pakistan and 103,146 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the same period, the United Nations assisted in the return of 2,692 refugees from Pakistan, 694 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 22 from other countries. The number of registered refugees returning to Afghanistan is significantly lower than in 2017 (10,596 from Pakistan, 419 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 68 from other countries). The number of undocumented returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran has soared, with more than 602,524 returnees and deportees in 2018 (January to September) compared with 382,003 in 2017 (January to September), in an apparent response to the worsening economic situation in the country. Humanitarian agencies are trying to reach returnees and provide them with a package of food, cash and other basic necessities to facilitate their reintegration. In October, the Government of Pakistan extended proof of registration cards for some 1.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan until 30 June 2019.

55. Constraints on humanitarian access continued, with a total of 69 incidents affecting the United Nations and partners from 16 August to 31 October. Since the beginning of the year, a total of 318 incidents have been recorded, including the killings of 26 aid workers. Moreover, 48 aid workers were injured, 76 were abducted and 46 were detained. Deminers continue to face a risk of kidnapping and armed

violence. Humanitarian access in contested areas and areas under the control of anti-government elements remained a persistent challenge. In October, the Taliban renewed its guarantees for the safe passage of staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross, two months after it had been withdrawn. The Committee subsequently welcomed the renewal of its security guarantee.

56. As at 31 October, humanitarian activities in Afghanistan had received $312.8 million in funding, including $248.2 million for activities included in the humanitarian response plan.

VI. Counter-narcotics

57. The Government, supported by international partners, continued its counter-narcotics operations. From 16 August to 31 October, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 835 operations leading to seizures of 2,646 kg of heroin, 9,060 kg of morphine, 12,578 kg of opium, 941 kg of methamphetamine, 4,040 kg of hashish, 16,256 kg of cannabis, 11,787 tablets of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), 4,417 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 14,344 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. In total, eight heroin manufacturing laboratories were dismantled; 1,017 suspects were arrested; and 86 vehicles, 140 weapons, 341 mobile telephones and five radios were seized. One officer of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police was killed while carrying out operations.

58. The 2018 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan was finalized and released in November. Its findings show a moderate decrease in opium cultivation and production compared with 2017, with significant decreases in cultivation and production noted in the northern and western regions owing to the drought. In a joint initiative by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, the Ministry of Counter Narcotics and UNODC, a two-day national conference on the role of agricultural extension in the promotion of alternative development in Afghanistan was held on 1 and 2 October in Kabul City. The event was attended by 150 farmers and extension workers and showcased agricultural inputs and technological advances by the private sector, as well marketing opportunities for crop and livestock products.

VII. Mission support

59. As at 31 October, the Mission's vacancy rates were 7 per cent for international staff, 5 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 per cent for local-level staff, compared with the approved rates of 11.1 per cent, 8.5 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff remained very low. As at 31 October, the percentage of women in each category of staff stood at 36 per cent for international staff, 37 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 7 per cent for local-level staff. Between 1 August and 31 October, UNAMA conducted 197 road and 23 air missions, as well as 1,004 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

60. Noting the many security, logistical and political challenges facing the electoral management bodies of Afghanistan, I welcome the timely conduct of parliamentary elections under difficult circumstances. The elections once again demonstrated the commitment of Afghan citizens to participating in democratic processes. I am heartened by the courage and determination shown by the millions of Afghan women

and men who turned out to vote across the country, often overcoming significant obstacles and defying serious security threats to elect their representatives. I condemn the deliberate acts of violence against civilians perpetrated by anti-government elements throughout the electoral process, including the spike in attacks against electoral and related targets on 20 October, which resulted in the highest number of civilian casualties recorded on a single day in 2018. Apart from inflicting serious harm on civilians, such violence represents a clear attack on the constitutional right of Afghan citizens to political participation. Recalling the stated commitment of the Taliban to protect civilians in armed conflict, I call upon all parties to respect the right of Afghans to participate in all stages of the electoral process freely and without fear or threat of violence.

61. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that the elections and their aftermath were marred by technical shortcomings, some of them preventable and some resulting from an overstretched Independent Electoral Commission. Delays in opening polling centres, problems associated with the late introduction of biometric voter verification and administrative errors in voter lists led to serious delays on election day, causing some voters to turn away without casting their ballots. These frustrations, together with delays in vote counting and tabulation since the elections, have weakened the credibility of the country's electoral institutions at a critical moment in the electoral cycle. I call upon the electoral management bodies to safeguard the transparency of the process during the post-election phase as a first step towards regaining the confidence of the Afghan people, including by providing clear information on all aspects of the process. Recalling that the elections could not be held in Ghazni Province, I encourage the Government and the Independent Election Commission to give due priority to resolving outstanding security, political and logistical issues to enable the people of Ghazni to elect their parliamentary representatives. For the rest of the provinces, the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission must do everything possible to accelerate the process of vote counting and tabulation of results in a credible, transparent and timely manner.

62. With the approach of the presidential elections in April 2019, I encourage the electoral management bodies to take appropriate measures based on lessons learned from the parliamentary elections to ensure coherent decision-making and the timely implementation of all necessary procedures. Equally, it is imperative that all political stakeholders assume responsibility for the electoral process. The blocking by political parties of the offices of the Independent Election Commission prior to the elections in order to force the introduction of biometric technology led to serious delays in the completion of key preparatory activities. The late accession by the Government to the demand for biometrics overloaded the Commission's capacity in the crucial weeks before the election. While peaceful protest is the constitutional right of all Afghans, I am concerned about the use of obstructive tactics by some political parties and candidates. Such tactics can deprive other citizens of their right to vote and, if pursued systematically, threaten to undermine the electoral system. As the Government and the electoral management bodies continue preparations for the presidential elections, I call upon all stakeholders, including candidates, political parties and civil society organizations, to engage constructively in all aspects of the electoral process. Only through the sincere and united efforts of the leaders and institutions of Afghanistan will its citizens be granted the opportunity to vote in elections worthy of their participation, with guarantees that their votes will be respected.

63. I am deeply concerned about the worsening impact of the armed conflict on the civilian population, as UNAMA continues to document record-high numbers of civilian deaths. While efforts on the battlefield have led to some reductions in civilian casualties from ground engagements, the continued rise in civilian casualties from

suicide and aerial attacks is worrying. Of the utmost concern is the increased targeting of civilians by anti-government elements, exemplified by the violence directed at the Afghan population participating in the electoral processes. I urge parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and anti-government elements to cease all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

64. The high and rising cost of the conflict in civilian lives is a stark reminder that ending the conflict through peace negotiations must remain the foremost imperative guiding all efforts in Afghanistan. In keeping with the principle of Afghan ownership, I encourage the Government to strengthen the inclusivity of the peace process, ensuring that a diverse range of views is taken into account at every stage. Noting the recent expansion in contact between the Taliban and members of the international community, I underline the necessity for the Taliban to engage in direct talks with the Government of Afghanistan with a view to reaching a solution to the conflict. The United Nations stands ready to support all peace efforts through any available means.

65. I remain deeply concerned about the prevalence of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan. Such violence causes profound human suffering, inflicts grave harm on families and inhibits the full participation of women in public life. In this light, the establishment by the Government of a technical committee to review the Elimination of Violence against Women Law of 2009 is an encouraging step. I am optimistic that the review will result in stronger and rights-based legal protection from violence for all Afghan women and girls.

66. Humanitarian, health and education workers continue to face unacceptable risks as they undertake critical tasks across Afghanistan. I am deeply concerned about the increase in attacks against health facilities and health-care personnel, as well as attacks against school facilities and disruptions to the educational process. Such attacks and activities are unjustifiable under any circumstances. I urge parties to the conflict to take measures to allow health facilities to function without interruption and to respect the right to education for both boys and girls without interference. Similarly, the recent spate of efforts by anti-government elements to hinder humanitarian demining operations, including through threats and intimidation against and the kidnapping of deminers, have delayed and derailed life-saving projects. All parties must allow humanitarian demining teams unimpeded access to affected areas.

67. Notwithstanding the volatile environment, Afghanistan made progress in the past year in improving the investment climate, moving from 183 to 167 in the ease of doing business rankings of the World Bank. A first for Afghanistan, this climb puts the country among the top improvers globally. This commendable result signals progress towards the goals of the Transformation Decade (2015–2024), including generating economic growth to achieve self-reliance. The revision of the anti-corruption strategy provides a valuable opportunity for the Government to clarify the institutional framework guiding anti-corruption efforts, in line with the commitments of Afghanistan under the United Nations Convention against Corruption. I encourage the Government to continue its constructive engagement with civil society organizations and international partners throughout the process.

68. At the ministerial conference on Afghanistan held on 27 and 28 November in Geneva, the international community demonstrated its continued commitment to Afghanistan, and discussions were focused on the Government's reform agenda. As noted at the Conference, the Government has made progress on key elements of this agenda, including the finalization of 10 national priority programmes, the implementation of far-reaching fiscal reforms and the promotion of the participation of women in public life. In other areas, progress remained limited. I welcome the adoption of the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework by Afghanistan and

international donors. The Framework provides a clear road map for mutually agreed reform priorities over the next two years, in alignment with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework. The United Nations will continue to provide coherent support to the Government as it implements its reform agenda for the benefit of all citizens, with a view to achieving peace, development and self-reliance during the Transformation Decade.

69. I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.